

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER
LISTED

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

JUL 02 2008

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A) Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-9000a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

Historic name Dunbar Theatre

Other name/site number 173-5880-2470

2. Location

Street & number 1007 N. Cleveland

☐ not for publication

City or town Wichita

☐ vicinity

State Kansas Code KS County Sedgwick Code 173 Zip code 67214

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination
☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of
Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property
☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant
☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Patricia J. H. DSHPO
Signature of certifying official/Title
Kansas State Historical Society

5/16/08
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional
Comments.)

Signature of commenting official /Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

☐ entered in the National Register. _____
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the National
Register

☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the
National Register

☐ removed from the National
Register

☐ other, (explain:)

Dunbar Theatre
Name of Property

Sedgwick County, Kansas
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
☐ public-local
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1		total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas

**Number of contributing resources previously listed
in the National Register**

NA

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter Categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT/moderne

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation: CONCRETE
Walls: CONCRETE, BRICK, OTHER (Hollow Clay Tile)

Roof: METAL (Steel Trusses)

Other:

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Dunbar Theatre
Name of Property

Sedgwick County, Kansas
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register)

- ☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

PERFORMING ARTS

SOCIAL HISTORY

COMMERCE

Period of Significance

1941-1957

Significant Dates

1941

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Raymond M. Harmon, Architect

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering
Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository:

Dunbar Theatre
Name of Property

Sedgwick County, Kansas
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than 1 acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1

1	4	6	4	7	9	5	2	4	1	7	3	7	6	0
Zone		Easting						Northing						

2

Zone		Easting						Northing						

3

Zone		Easting						Northing						

4

Zone		Easting						Northing						

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

Name/title Christy Davis

Organization Davis Preservation

Date 09/04/2007

Street & number 909 1/2 Kansas Ave. Suite 7

Telephone 785-234-5053

City or town Topeka

State KS

Zip code 66612

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

Name Community Developers, LLC

Street & number 1802 N. Hydraulic St.

Telephone 316-267-3036

City or town Wichita

State Kansas

Zip code 67214

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Dunbar Theatre
Wichita, Sedgwick County, KS

Section number 7 Page 1

Narrative Description

Setting

The Dunbar Theatre¹ is located at 1007 N. Cleveland, in the commercial core of Wichita's McAdams neighborhood. Historically, the theater shared a north wall with an adjacent commercial building. Other neighborhood businesses included a drug store, ice cream shop, hair salon, barber shop, shoe repair, barbecue restaurant, fish market, pool hall and grocery store. Other centers of neighborhood activity included the historically segregated Dunbar School, St. Matthew CME Church and Phyllis Wheatley Children's Home (1935), a home for black orphans. The small business district lies within a residential neighborhood filled with early to mid-twentieth century homes, from bungalows to ranch houses.

Overall

The building is two stories in height and three bays wide. Its principal exterior material is hard-fired blond brick. Other materials include red brick, hollow clay tile, and concrete masonry units. There is a non-historic addition on the rear (west) elevation. It is constructed with reinforced concrete and concrete block infill. Although the building's original marquee is no longer extant, the building's exterior retains a high degree of architectural integrity. The building's interior is divided into three principal spaces: the open auditorium, stage/storage, and two-story commercial/office space. The interior is in deteriorated condition. Past property owners began rehabilitating the building in 1997 and left it in a state of incomplete rehabilitation.

Front (East) Elevation

The east elevation is symmetrical, divided into three bays. The center bay is recessed on the first level to house two double entry doors flanking a ticket booth. There are sign boards on the sides of the double entry doors. The bays that flank the recessed entry bay each house a small retail space, each with a tall narrow window, a larger window, and a pedestrian entry. The door on the south bay, which appears to have been widened, has a multi-lite transom over it. Four horizontal bands of red brick divide the first and second floors. The second floor has a centered four-pane industrial steel sash window in the center bay. The north and south bays each have eight-pane industrial steel sash windows. The second-floor windows have red brick soldier-coursed lintels. A neon sign that reads "Dunbar Theatre" is placed above the center window. Two red brick bands and a cast-stone cap delineate the parapet.

Rear (West) Elevation

A three-bay west-projecting reinforced concrete addition marks the west elevation. The two-story side bays have open reinforced concrete piers on the first level and concrete block infill on the second floor. The open first levels provide for unenclosed fire exits on each side of the auditorium. The center bay is one story in height. Unlike the first stories of the side bays, which are open, the center bay has concrete block infill on the first floor.

¹ This alternate spelling of "theater" is used because the neon sign on the building's façade reads "Dunbar Theatre" This spelling was also used in the theater's advertisements.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Dunbar Theatre
Wichita, Sedgwick County, KS

Section number 7 Page 2

North and South Elevations

The north and south elevations are identical. On both sides, the high-quality blond brick and red-brick bands wrap around to the north and south elevations. Beyond this, the elevations feature a combination of lower-quality brick and hollow clay tile painted white. There are no window or door openings on the north and south elevations. The north elevation historically abutted an adjacent building that has been razed. The historic floor of the missing building, which appears in historic photographs, is still visible.

Interior

The building's interior is divided into three principal spaces: the open auditorium, stage/storage, and two-story commercial/office space. The east end has two floors. Two retail spaces and a center foyer occupy the first floor. There are offices and a projection room on the second floor. Two double doors lead from the entry foyer to the auditorium space. Although the seating is no longer intact, the stage and proscenium arch are intact. The north and south walls of the auditorium angle toward the proscenium arch, stage, and movie screen on the west end. The steel roof trusses that span the auditorium space are exposed. All interior walls are plastered masonry. Doors on either side of the stage access fire exits and stairs on the first floor. The stairs lead to second-story storage spaces. The west-projecting concrete additions are accessed via openings at the rear of the stage.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Dunbar Theatre
Wichita, Sedgwick County, KS

Section number 8 Page 3

Statement of Significance

Introduction

The Dunbar Theatre, located at 1007 N. Cleveland in Wichita, Kansas (population about 114, 966), is a focal point of Wichita's traditionally African-American McAdams neighborhood. The building is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the areas of ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION, PERFORMING ARTS, SOCIAL HISTORY and COMMERCE and under Criterion C in the area of ARCHITECTURE as an example of Modern Theater design. The building meets the registration requirements for the MOVIE THEATER property type as described in the Multiple Property Submission "Historic Theaters and Opera Houses in Kansas."

The McAdams Neighborhood

The history of the Dunbar Theatre is inextricably tied to the history of the McAdams neighborhood, a traditionally black neighborhood northeast of downtown Wichita. At the time the Dunbar Theatre was constructed in 1941, African Americans made up approximately 5% of Wichita's population. During World War II and the Cold War, Wichita's growing aircraft industry drew thousands of new residents. The African-American population alone jumped from 5600 in 1940 to 8000 in 1950. Black families were drawn to Wichita not only because of employment opportunities, but also because the city had an established African-American community, centered in the McAdams neighborhood.

Although, like their counterparts in the US military, blacks and whites worked side by side in the aircraft industry, Wichita's neighborhoods were segregated. Because McAdams was far from downtown – and because blacks could not count on being served by white-owned businesses, the neighborhood developed its own commercial core, with businesses promoted in *The Tattler*, the city's black newspaper. Among the businesses that took root were Turner Drug (drug store and soda fountain), ice cream shop, hair salon, barber shop, shoe repair, barbecue restaurant, fish market, pool hall, grocery store, and Dunbar Theatre. Other centers of neighborhood activity included the historically segregated Dunbar School, St. Matthew CME Church and Phyllis Wheatley Children's Home (1935), a home for black orphans.²

In the 1960s, the construction of I-135 and associated canal route greatly impacted the McAdams neighborhood, forcing out residents and businesses and dividing the neighborhood in half. As the enactment of housing discrimination laws in the 1960s and 1970s opened other neighborhoods to blacks, the McAdams neighborhood, and the business activity not already affected by the canal route construction, began to decline. A 2003 Neighborhood Revitalization Plan promises to breathe new life into McAdams through public and private investment in housing and the central business core.³

² Wichita/Sedgwick County MAPD, "Dunbar Theater Redevelopment Feasibility Study Report," 2006.

³ Judith R. Johnson and Craig T. Torbenson, "African American Experiences in Wichita, Kansas" *Kansas History* 21, no.

4 (1999) 220-233; Wichita/Sedgwick County MAPD, "McAdams Neighborhood Revitalization Plan," 2003, see

<http://wichita.gov/NR/rdonlyres/AE3D591C-8494-49CC-9A79->

DA12AE1B4C40/0/McAdams_Neighborhood_Revitalization_Plan_16d.pdf.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Dunbar Theatre
Wichita, Sedgwick County, KS

Section number 8 Page 4

The Dunbar Theatre

The Dunbar Theatre was built at a time in movie theater history when theater owners were moving away from downtowns and into outlying neighborhoods, like Wichita's McAdams neighborhood. Although attendance declined during the first years of the Great Depression, the movie business began to thrive again after 1935. The Dunbar was completed just four months before America entered World War II, when materials and projection equipment shortages slowed theater construction. Despite war shortages, the years between 1941 and 1945, the Dunbar's first years in business, came to be known as the "golden age of cinema."⁴

Like the nearby Dunbar school, the Dunbar Theatre was named for poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906). Dunbar was born to freed Kentucky slaves in Ohio. With the encouragement of his mother, he began writing poems, publishing by the age of 14. His work appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, *Sunday Evening Post*, the *Denver Post* and *Current Literature*. Before his untimely death at the age of 33, Dunbar published 12 volumes of poetry. Perhaps it was his role as a lyricist for musical reviews that caused those involved in the theater development to borrow his name.⁵

Although it is unclear who commissioned the construction, the Dunbar Theatre was built from plans by architect Raymond M. Harmon (1915-1983). Ray Harmon, who grew up in Wichita, was the son of railroad postal clerk Raymond Harmon, Sr. and his wife Lillian Harmon.⁶ At the time the Dunbar was built, Harmon was just beginning his career in the design field. He married his wife Erlis and opened his architectural firm by 1940, when he had an office at 116 S. Main in Wichita.⁷ Later in his career, Harmon practiced engineering, becoming president of Harmon and Beckett Engineers.⁸

Harmon's design was consistent with other Kansas movie theaters constructed at the time, including Coldwater's Chief Theater (1928, renovated 1947) and Burlington's Music Box Theater (1942). (See MOVIE THEATER Property Type in Theaters MPS.) Unlike the movie palaces that pre-dated them, these theaters were relatively small with streamlined Art Moderne design and simple fireproof materials. The Dunbar was built to seat 500.⁹ Although its interior included a stage for community events, the theater was built principally for movies, unlike 1920s theaters built for both movies and vaudeville.

News accounts at the time of the opening boasted that the theater had the "most modern equipment attainable ... including newest sound and projection equipment ... luxurious seats ... [and] year round air conditioning."¹⁰ The Kansas Rock Wool Insulation Company, Shelby Electric, Wichita Millwork, United Brick and Tile Co., Steel Fire Doors, East Side Hardware, and Shelf and Builders Hardware installed the modern equipment and materials.¹¹ Articles about the building's construction failed to document a general contractor.

4 Historic Preservation Services, "Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas," Multiple Property Documentation Form, 2004.

5 For information on Paul Lawrence Dunbar, see <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/302>; <http://www.dunbarsite.org/biopld.asp>. Accessed September 3, 2007.

6 1930 US Census.

7 1940 Wichita City Directory.

8 "Ray M. Harmon, Jr.," *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 22 January 1983.

9 "Colored Theater Will Open Tonight," *Wichita Eagle*, 15 August 1941.

10 Ibid.

11 "Dunbar Theatre," *Negro Star*, 26 September 1941.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Dunbar Theatre
Wichita, Sedgwick County, KS

Section number 8 Page 5

It is likely that the architect managed the construction. Most of the work was completed United Brick and Tile Co., which built the exterior walls.

The Dunbar Theatre was formally opened at 7:00 p.m. on August 15, 1941. American Enterprises, Inc. leased the theater. According to an announcement of the opening, Maurice S. Baudry, who managed the business, and Ed Walker, the projectionist, would be "the only white persons employed at the theater." At the time of the opening, Winfield Burks (1890-1971), a Tennessee native and mail carrier, was the assistant manager. Edna Terrill was the cashier; Helen Lambert ran concessions; Clarice Helm and Twila Jackson were "usherettes;" and A. Holt was the custodian. The theater opened with two movies, "Road to Zanzibar" with Bing Crosby and "The Gang's All Here" with Mantan Moreland, and a cartoon.¹²

In the years that followed its opening, the Dunbar became more than a movie theater, hosting community events like the Emith Temple AEONMS Christmas party for neighborhood children. By the late 1940s, the Theater was involved in the publication of a community news and social magazine called *The Tattler and Coming Attractions*. The free paper featured not only Dunbar movie listings, but also updates on social occasions like weddings and feature stories on accomplished youth. Headquartered at the Dunbar Theatre, the publication was funded through advertisements from local businesses. At their peak in the late 1940s, both the theater and paper were managed by Arthur M. Ford. Despite the theater's central role in the community, it could not compete in an increasingly desegregated environment. The theater closed in the late 1950s. Dunbar School closed in 1971.

After the theater and school closed, the McAdams neighborhood declined and its commercial buildings deteriorated. By the 1970s, the theater was dilapidated – and various attempts to rehabilitate it failed. Despite opposition of some community leaders, the city placed the building on its list of condemned buildings to be demolished in the late 1980s. In October 1990, Wichita's Historic Preservation Board voted to recommend the building's designation as a local landmark. The City Council voted to postpone the final designation pending submission of a preservation plan. Then-owner Gregory Jones said he could not submit the plans until the city designated the building. The city condemned the building again in May 1991, only to give it a reprieve again in February 1992. By then, gospel singer and bail bondsman Willie Crocklin had purchased the building and was heading up the effort to save it, obtaining a grant from the city and hosting various fundraisers.

Although several early efforts to rehabilitate the Dunbar were unsuccessful, the building's plight turned the city's focus toward the declining neighborhood. In 1994, the city conducted a historic property survey of the area with the aim of designating it as a historic district. In 1997, the Dunbar Theatre was placed on the city's top 25 endangered buildings list. Rehabilitation efforts ceased when the city learned that work had commenced without the proper inspections. Today the building, which has passed through many hands since its closing, stands in a state of incomplete rehabilitation and severe deterioration. The current owners, Power CDC, purchased the property from Hall Industrial Development, LLC in August 2007. With funds from rehabilitation tax credits and federal grants, Power CDC hopes to rehab the building for use as a community center.¹³

¹² "Colored Theater Will Open Tonight."

¹³ Lainie Rusco, "\$2.5M redevelopment plan for Dunbar Theater under way," *Wichita Business Journal*, 10 August 2007; Beccy Tanner, "Dunbar's Future Still Looks Bleak," *Wichita Eagle*, 21 March 1991; Jim Lynn, "Black Leaders About to Give up on Theater," *Wichita Eagle*, 15 May 1991; Jim Lynn, "City Council Condemns Dunbar Theater," *Wichita Eagle*,

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Dunbar Theatre
Wichita, Sedgwick County, KS

Section number 8 Page 6

Summary

The Dunbar Theatre was more than a movie theater. It was a social and community center. Today, the building interprets the history of the McAdams neighborhood and center of community activities and is being nominated for both architectural and historical significance under the "Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas" MPDF.

22 May 1991; Beccy Tanner, "Theater Saved Again for Now," *Wichita Eagle*, 6 February 1992; Beccy Tanner, "Concert is Planned to Help the Dunbar," *Wichita Eagle*, 7 May 1992; Beccy Tanner, "Black Area Surveyed as Historic District," *Wichita Eagle*, 17 October 1994; Beccy Tanner, "Board Ready to Study Historic Role of Dunbar," *Wichita Eagle*, 10 February 1997; Beccy Tanner, "Dunbar Owner Pulls Bid for Historic Listing," *Wichita Eagle*, 7 March 1997; Christina M. Woods, "Raising Dunbar's Curtain Again," *Wichita Eagle* 15 June 2006.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 7

**Dunbar Theatre
Wichita, Sedgwick County, KS**

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Dunbar Theatre
Wichita, Sedgwick County, KS

Section number 10 Page 8

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property is located at 1007 N. Cleveland in Wichita, Kansas. The legal description is as follows: BEG 92 FT N & 30 FT W SE COR SW1/4 NE1/4 W 130 FT N 50 FT E 130 FT S TO BEG SEC 16-27-1E.

Boundary Justification

The above is the legal description for the parcel on which the Dunbar Theatre lies.

Photo Log

1. Exterior, Front (East) Elevation, Looking West.
2. Exterior, Side (South) Elevation, Looking Northeast.
3. Exterior, Rear (West) Elevation, Looking Northeast.
4. Exterior, Front (East) and Side (South) Elevation, Looking Northwest.
5. Exterior, Close-up of Main Entrance.
6. Interior, Proscenium Arch, Looking West.
7. Interior, Projection Booth, Rear of Auditorium, Looking East.
8. Interior, Auditorium, Steel-Truss Ceiling.
9. Interior, Second-Floor Projection Booth, East end of Building.
10. Interior, Auditorium, North Wall.
11. Historic Photo of the Interior

